2. Foxes in Charge of the Chickens

Nicholas Hildyard

The Earth Summit debacle

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the self-styled Earth Summit, finished where it began. After ten days of press conferences, tree planting ceremonies and behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing, the diplomats went home to their various other assignments and the politicians to their next round of international talks. Rio gave way to the Economic Summit at Munich and the more familiar territory of GATT, G-7 power politics and interest rates.

For the major players, the Earth Summit was a phenomenal success. The World Bank not only emerged with its development policies intact but with control of an expanded Global Environmental Facility (GEF), a prize that it had worked for two years to achieve. The US got the biodiversity convention it sought simply by not signing the convention on offer. The corporate sector, which throughout the UNCED process enjoyed special access to the Secretariat, also got what it wanted: the final documents not only treated TNCs with kid gloves but extolled them as key actors in the 'battle to save the planet'. Free-market environmentalism - the philosophy that TNCs brought to Rio through the Business Council on Sustainable Development - has become the order of the day, uniting Southern and Northern leaders alike. For many environmental groups, too, the Summit was a success: careers have been made, credibility achieved (some even having scats on government delegations) and their concerns are no longer marginalized. They are now recognized as major players themselves.

In brief, the Summit went according to plan. The net outcome was to minimize change to the status quo, an outcome that was inevitable from the outset of the UNCED process three years ago. Unwilling to question the desirability of economic growth, the market economy or the development process itself, UNCED never had a chance of addressing the real problems of 'environment and development'. Its Secretariat provided delegates with materials for a convention on biodiversity but not on free trade; on forests but not on agribusiness; on climate but not on automobiles. Agenda 21 - the Summit's 'action plan' - featured clauses on 'enabling the poor to achieve sustainable livelihoods' but none on enabling the rich to do so; a section on women but none on men. By such deliberate evasion of the central issues which economic expansion poses for human societies, UNCED condemned itself to irrelevance even before the first preparatory meeting got under way.

Conflicting interests, differing perceptions

In that respect, the best that can be said for the Earth Summit is that it made visible the vested interests that stand in the way of the moraleconomic that local people seek to establish the face of today's degradation of their rivers, lakes, streams. fishing grounds, rangelands, forests and fields. For those who rely on the commons, such degradation means a loss of dignity and independence, security, livelihood and health. Defending the commons is thus often a matter of life and death. By contrast, figures in government, business and international organizations whose livelihoods do not depend directly on what is around them tend to view environmental degradation and the protests it provokes as threats to their political interest. For them the environment is not what is around their homes but what is around their economies. Northern leaders within UNCED, for example, were preoccupied with how to keep growing South from tapping resources and tilling up waste sinks which the North has grown accustomed to using, while simultaneously maintaining the global capital flows which would help the global economy expand. Southern leaders, responding to prodding from Northern capital and hoping to benefit themselves as well, were equally preoccupied with extending the boundaries of their economies by bringing more land under the plough, logging more forests, diverting more water to industry and so on.

Not surprisingly, the three groups approach environmental degradation differently. For those who rely on the commons, the only response that makes sense is to concentrate on what has proved to be effective in the past, a response that entails maintaining or creating a space in which local commons regimes can root themselves. Such a strategy entails pushing for an erosion of the power of those who would undermine the commons, so that capital flows around the globe can be reduced, local control increased, consumption cut and markets limited. The demands of grassroots groups are thus not for more 'management' - a buzzword at Rio - but for agrarian reform, local control over local resources, the power to veto developments and a decisive say in all matters that affect their livelihoods. For them, the question is not how their environment should be managed - they have the
experience of the past as their guide—but who will manage their environment and in whose interest. They reject UNCED’s rhetoric of a world where all humanity is united by a common interest in survival, and instead they ask, ‘Whose common future is to be sustained through the conventions and deals cut at UNCED? Their struggle is not to win greater power for the market or the state, but to reinstate the community as the ultimate source of authority-in-effect, to reclaim the commons.

By contrast, the preferred response of world leaders and mainstream environmentalists is to seek further enclosure of the commons by the market and the state, in the hope that whatever troublesome environmental damage has been caused by previous enclosure can be remedied by more far-reaching enclosure in the future. This approach seeks to preserve economic expansion through a programme of global management of both the environment and people. It has never been attempted before on the scale proposed. Previous less ambitious attempts, moreover, have not only failed to arrest environmental degradation, they have exacerbated it. Nonetheless, it is this path which has been chosen by the Secretariat and virtually all delegations at UNCED, as well as by the major multilateral development agencies and many scientific and conservation organizations.

The threat of environmentalism

The issues under discussion at UNCED were not new: on the contrary, from the smokestacks of Victorian Britain to the logged-out moonscapes of modern-day British Colombia or Sarawak, environmental degradation has gone hand-in-hand with economic expansion, as commercial interests have sacrificed local livelihoods and environments in order to obtain raw materials, transform them into commodities, market them and dispose of the wastes. Nor has the destruction gone unchallenged. In the South, local cultures have fought successive attempts-tint by colonial regimes and then by their ‘own’ post-independence governments, acting in consort with commercial interests and international development agencies to transform their homelands and themselves into ‘resources’ for the global economy. Timber operations have been sabotaged, logging roads blockaded, dams delayed, commercial plantations uprooted, factories and installations burned, mines closed down and rallies held in a constant effort to keep outside forces at bay.

Likewise in the North, the history of protest against the ravages of industrialism is a long one, coalescing initially around the machine-breaking and public health movements of the 19th century and emerging latterly in the many and diverse groupings now challenging environmental pollution, declining food quality, countryside destruction, health hazards in the home and workplace, and the erosion of community life. As in the South, such movements have expressed their concerns using whatever channels are available to them—from civil disobedience to legal challenges, boycotts and alliances with like-minded groups. Toxic waste dumps have been picketed, sites for nuclear power plants occupied, polluting pipelines capped, companies boycotted, whaling ships buzzed, and media campaigns mounted in an attempt both to combat environmental degradation and to put the environment on the political agenda.

Where environmental destruction was limited to the local level—a clear-cut forest here, a leaking toxic waste dump there, a polluted river here, a salinized tract of land there—and where protest was restricted to isolated movements, the threat that they posed to established patterns of power could be contained with relative ease. Commercial and industrial interests were able to follow strategies of simply denying the destruction in the name of ‘the greater good’ or the ‘national interest’. Opposition could be met by force or played down as ‘uninformed’, ‘reactionary’, ‘luddite’ or subversive. The reaction of the Velsicol Corporation to the publication in the early 1960s of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, the book which in many respects launched the ‘green’ movement in the North, is illustrative. In a live-page letter to Carson’s publishers, Velsicol accused her of being in league with ‘sinister influences, whose attacks on the chemical industry have a dual purpose: (1) to create the false impression that all business is grasping and immoral, and (2) to reduce the use of agricultural chemicals in this country and in the countries of western Europe so that our supply of food will be reduced to east-curtain parity.”

Crude as such attacks are, they still persist. Recently, Bill Holmes, a former member of the California State Board of Forestry, told the 1991 Redwood Region Logging Conference:

In California we continue to plunge toward new ill-fated experiments in socialized timber management. The Hollywood crowd and other people in the US who hate America while worshipping Russia and its totalitarian system have jumped into bed with their environmental friends who welcomed them with open arms. They already had a great deal in common because, although not all left-wing radicals are environmentalists, certainly all environmentalists embrace some form of left-wing radical collectivism. As a result, the greatest threat to you, to me, to our communities, to our state and to our nation is no longer communism, it is not drugs, not AIDS, not crime, not poverty, not even liberal democrats, but radical environmentalism.1

Bill Holmes’ vision of a communist conspiracy is clearly absurd, but he is right to be worried by the way in which alliances are being formed between
formerly isolated, local or national citizens’ groups, in order to resist the powerful interests that are threatening their commons. Indeed, it is arguably only as a result of such alliances that the previously marginalized discourse of environmentalism has been forced into the political mainstream, transforming ecological destruction from a ‘side issue’ that corporations and governments felt able to disregard, into lost markets and lost votes. If timber companies are now making noises about moving towards ‘sustainable’ logging practices, it is not because they have suddenly become aware of the damage they are causing to the environment (in many instances, they still deny the problem) but because timber boycotts and local protests have forced them to respond to growing public outrage over their activities. Likewise, if the landtilling of toxic wastes in the US is now being phased out, it is not because US companies themselves view landfill as an environmentally unacceptable means of waste disposal (US companies see no problems in landtilling their wastes in Britain or the Third World, for instance, where standards are lower) but rather because the spread of popular protest in the US had made it clear that ‘not in anybody’s backyard’ means ‘not in anybody’s backyard’, leaving corporate executives with no option but to seek other waste disposal strategies. As Andrew Szasz notes:

Community-based popular organization was the key factor. Indirectly, community protest pushed Washington to strengthen regulatory controls. Directly, local opposition blocked the expansion of waste disposal and treatment capacity. Popular pressure worked on two levels: in Washington, mainstream environmental groups and members of Congress facing constituency pressure recognized how salient and volatile the issue was and supported stronger regulations. At the same time, local opposition to new facilities interacted with these stronger regulations to drive up disposal costs, and thus to raise economic pressures for waste reduction.

The threat of economic contraction

But the threat of environmentalism goes deeper than simply upsetting individual corporate apple cuts. Tighter environmental standards— not to speak of environmental degradation itself—now threaten the throughput of resources in the global economy. As the Brundtland Commission, whose report Our Common Future initiated the UNCED process, puts it: ‘We have in the past been concerned about the impacts of economic growth upon the environment. We are now forced to concern ourselves with the impacts of ecological stress upon our economic prospects.’

It is not clear whose ‘economic prospects’ Brundtland is referring to (at the local level, environmental degradation has been threatening local economic prospects for many decades); what is clear, however, is that environmental stress— and the pressure to ease it— is already denying resources to the global economy, whilst simultaneously depriving it of sinks into which the waste products of industrialism can readily (and cheaply) be disposed. As soils are eroded, so land is taken out of production; as the seas are overfished and rivers polluted, so fisheries crash; as forests are logged out or succumb to damage from air pollution, so timber supplies are threatened; and as the economic costs of mitigating damage rise, so capital is diverted away from productive growth. In the US alone, soil compaction— the direct result of modern mechanized agriculture— is estimated to have cost farmers some $3 billion in lost yields in 1980 alone. The damage already incurred through acid rain and pollution-related forest die-back in Europe and the US has been put at $30 billion. Whilst the estimated cost of cleaning up the 2,000 worst polluting toxic waste dumps in the US has been put at $100 billion. No realistic figure can even be put on the social and economic disruption that will be incurred through global warming and ozone depletion. The likely loss of species alone makes the price tag incalculable.

Both Northern and Southern governments— voicing the concerns of industrial interests— argue that such costs could not be borne without sending the global economy into a tail-spin. For those whose livelihoods are being daily undermined by the growth economy, however, economic contraction is not the threat that the mainstream would have us believe: on the contrary, it brings the possibility of reclaiming the commons, of restoring what development has destroyed, and of living with dignity. As Gustavo Esteva, a social activist living in Mexico City, reports:

With falling oil prices, mounting debts, and the conversion of Mexico into a free trade zone so that transnational capital can produce Volkswagen ‘Beetles’ in automated factories for export to Germany, the corruption of our politics and the degradation of Nature— always implicit in development— can finally be seen, touched and smelled by everyone. Now the poor of Mexico are responding by recreating their own moral economy. As Mexico’s Rural Development Bank no longer has sufficient funds to force peasants to plant sorghum for animal feed, many have returned to the traditional intercropping of corn and beans, improving their diets, restoring some village solidarity and allowing available cash to reach further. In response to the decreasing purchasing power of the previously employed, thriving production cooperatives are springing up in the heart of Mexico City. Shops now exist in the slums that reconstruct electrical appliances; merchants prosper by imitating foreign trademarked goods and selling them as smuggled wares to tourists. Neighbourhoods have come back to life. Street stands and tiny
markets have returned to corners from where they had disappeared long ago. Complex forms of non-formal organization have developed, through which the barrio (village) residents create protective barriers between themselves and intruding development bureaucracies. police and other officials; light eviction and the confiscation of their assets; settle their own disputes and maintain public order.6

But whereas economic contraction provides a space in which the commons can regain some of its authority, it poses a direct threat to those whose power rests on the ability to sustain productive growth. The prospect of such contraction becoming a permanent feature of the economy as a result of environmental degradation and environmental protest has thus caused alarm bells to ring in corporate headquarters and other centres of power. Indeed, in a leaked memorandum, the US Environmental Protection Agency has described America’s ‘environmental justice movement’, beat known for its work in opposing toxic waste dumps, as the greatest threat to stability since the anti-war movement of the 1960s.

Containing challenges

It is not the first time in history that movements for social change have threatened the power of established commercial and political elites. As in the past, the ability of those elites to survive with their power intact will ultimately depend on how far they are able to turn that challenge to their advantage. Now that it has become clear that environmentalism and environmental degradation can no longer be ignored, outright resistance to change is giving way to strategies for managing that change.

At one level, the emphasis has been on blocking those demands that cannot be contained without loss of power. Within UNCED, for example, elaborate manoeuvring enabled individual industries to head off measures that would impose too heavy a cost on their activities. Most notably, corporate interests effectively blocked discussion of the environmental impact of Transnational Corporations (TNCs): recommendations drawn up by the UN’s own Centre for Transnational Corporations (UNCTC), which would have imposed tough global environmental standards on TNC activities, were shelved and instead a voluntary code of conduct, drawn up by the Business Council on Sustainable Development, a corporate lobbying group, was adopted as the Secretariat’s input into UNCED’s Agenda 21. The UNTC’s carefully crafted proposals were not even circulated to delegates. Meanwhile, a few months before the Rio Summit, the Centre itself was quietly closed down. Instead of being subject to a mandatory code of conduct, negotiated multilaterally, the TNCs emerged from UNCED without their role in causing environmental destruction even having been scrutinized in the official process, let alone curtailed.

On the contrary, governments, both North and South, have done everything in their power to protect the interests of their industrial and commercial lobbies. The US government’s negotiating position, for example, has consistently reflected the close ties between the Bush administration and corporate interests: the guidelines issued to US delegates negotiating the Climate Convention faithfully reflected the position of the oil industry. Delegates were advised that it was not beneficial to discuss whether there is or is not warming, or how much or how little warming. In the eyes of the public, we will lose this debate. A better approach is to raise the many uncertainties that need to be understood on this issue.'

Instead, the negotiators were told to stress ‘the world community is making great strides towards understanding the science of global change, but many fundamental questions remain unanswered’; and that ‘the economic impacts of potential global changes and possible responses are not well understood - more work is needed.’

A similar approach was adopted in the negotiations on biodiversity. the main priority of US negotiators being to block any measures that might harm the interests of biotechnology companies or undermine the patenting of ‘intellectual property’. During the fourth Preparatory Meeting for UNCED, for example, the US delegation insisted that references in Agenda 21 to the hazards of biotechnology should be deleted, arguing that the risks have been exaggerated. In this, the position taken by the US delegation was identical to that of the Heritage Foundation, an influential US think-tank with close links to the US administration. The US also deleted major sections of the Agenda 21 text which would have imposed safeguards against the experimentation with unsafe fertility regulating drugs on women in developing countries’. A proposed ban on ‘medical technologies in developing countries for purposes of experimentation in reproductive processes’ was similarly deleted at the US’ insistence.

Capturing the debate

Beyond such wrecking tactics, however, UNCED saw a conscious attempt by corporate and other mainstream interests to ‘capture’ the debate on environment and development and to frame it in terms that suit their purposes. Here a number of strategies came into play:

First, there was a concerted effort on the part of government and industry
to distance themselves from the destructiveness of ‘post’ policies. Constant references within the official documents to ‘recent satellite data, ‘new’ studies, ‘latest statistics’ and the like conveyed the impression that ecological degradation was a recent phenomenon — and one, moreover, that had primarily come to light through the diligence and foresight of government scientists, international institutions and industrial planners, thereby protecting the credibility and authority of those who bear prime responsibility for the activities that have created the current ecological crisis. The past disappeared from view, discreetly curtained off from scrutiny. Instead, the public was asked to look towards the future and with it, a new age of environmental awareness in which industry — now aware of the environment — had put its house in order to the satisfaction of earthworm and corporate executive alike. Industry’s record was thus wiped clean: the fox could now be put in charge of the chickens.

Second, there was an attempt to deny the many conflicts of interests underlying the crisis. Neither the institutional framework of global society nor the material interests and values it reflects received serious scrutiny. Instead, the ills under discussion were cast as having somehow ‘happened by themselves. No one would appear to have promoted the destruction, except by way of lack of knowledge, foresight or alternatives. No one was gaining power or profit from current policies; no one stood in the way of solutions. Instead, UNCED promoted a rosy-tinted view of a world where all humanity is united by a common interest in survival, and in which conflicts of class, race, culture and gender are characterized as of secondary importance to humanity’s supposedly common goals. Constant references to ‘humanity’s common resources’, for example, neatly obscured the fact that the vast majority of people have no access to those resources, which they neither own nor control, and which are selfishly exploited for the narrow ends of a few. (In Brazil, for example, multinational companies own more land than all the peasants put together. In Britain, just nine per cent of the population owns 84 per cent of the land.) Likewise, the flows of resources from humanity’s supposedly ‘common resource base’ are grossly unequal. In the last 50 years, the US has single-handedly consumed more fossil fuels and minerals than the rest of humanity has consumed in all recorded history. The US beef industry alone consumes as much food as the populations of India and China combined, an orgy of consumption that is possible only by starving other people.

Third, by removing environmental problems from their local setting and accentuating the global nature of the environmental crisis, UNCED gave currency to the view that all humans share a common responsibility for environmental destruction, either because of the demands they are currently placing on the environment or because of the demands they are expected to exert in the future. Thus, instead of ozone depletion being blamed—as it should be — on local corporate interests (Dupont, for example) using their global sales of CFCs and refrigerators regardless of the known environmental impact, responsibility for the ozone hole was pinned on the future demand for fridges in the Third World.

Fourth, by portraying environmental degradation as a global problem requiring global solutions, UNCED gave added impetus to those multinational interests who would extend their global reach. By definition, only international institutions and national governments were up to the task in hand.

Fifth, and closely allied to the above, there was an attempt to frame environmental problems in terms of ‘solutions’ which only the North (and its allies in the South) can provide. Underpinning Agenda 21, for example, is the view that environmental and social problems are primarily the result of insufficient capital (solution: increase Northern investment in the South); outdated technology (solution: open up the South to Northern technologies); a lack of expertise (solution: bring in Northern-educated managers and experts); and faltering economic growth (solution: push for an economic recovery in the North). The prior questions of whether money can solve the environmental crisis, of whose benefit is capital and technology transfers, and of whose environment is to be managed and on whose behalf, were simply sidelined. The development process itself went unchallenged and instead the environmental crisis was reduced to chequebook diplomacy: a big enough cheque and the Earth would be ‘saved’. Too small a cheque and humanity would disappear down the tube. All of which was music to the ears of politicians, corporate executives, bankers and business interests in both North and South.

And sixth, UNCED attempted to inspire environmentalist and industrialist alike with a ‘crisis management mentality’, in which the need for action was deemed more important than settling differences on what action should be taken, by whom, on whose say-so and with whose interests paramount. Few environmentalists would argue that environmental degradation has reached critical proportions — destroying local livelihoods, condemning species to extinction, blighting landscapes, and (if climatic disruption occurs on the scale predicted by some climatologists) possibly threatening the very future survival of humans and other mammals. But within UNCED the critical nature of such threats was used to justify giving those currently in power still more authority; to legitimate programmes which would remove control still further from local people; and to sanction more management. More top down development, more policing and still greater control of people. With ‘crisis management’ has come war-room environmentalism. The environmental crisis, it has been argued by some commentators, should be treated as if it were a military threat to national security requiring fast-acting intervention instruments, such as an international environmental police
force which should intervene whenever and wherever ecological threats are posed in or by a given country for the international community of nations.

**UNCED’s prescriptions: further enclosure**

That such thinking has gone unchallenged by mainstream environmental groups - indeed, in many instances, it is part of their rhetoric too - reflects the degree to which elites have been able to capture environmentalism and use it as a tool to increase their power. In that respect, now that UNCED is over, any hopes NGOs may have entertained about working on an equal footing with representatives of industrial interests have been delusions: they have constantly been outmanoeuvred. Worse still, the rhetoric they have embraced in the hope of nudging business and government in a more green direction is now being used to legitimize an agenda that, if unchallenged, threatens a new round of enclosure as devastating to the interests of ordinary people as anything that has gone before it. Consider the likely outcome of the new management regimes, capital flows and technology transfers that UNCED has set in motion.

Whilst local peoples have long managed their environments to sustain their livelihoods and cultures, the new environmental managers behind Agenda 21 have very different priorities. What is to be ‘managed’ are those aspects of the environment that have value to the global economy - from germplasm for biotechnology to pollution sinks and other commodities that can be traded. Increasingly, environmental managers assume the right to ‘protect’ the environment from demands that conflict with the ‘needs’ of commercial interests - a formula that labels local people, the main ‘competitors’ for ‘resources’, as the prime agents of environmental destruction. Once that premise is accepted, it is easy to demean the ways local people traditionally care for their environment. The way is thus opened for new institutions, administered for the needs of trade and commerce, to assume environmental management at all levels.

Within agriculture, for example, the policies promoted by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization at UNCED foresee the best land in Third World countries being zoned for cash crops. Only in those areas where ‘natural resource limitations’ or ‘environmental or socioeconomic constraints’ preclude intensification would farmers be allowed to grow their own food for their own use. Coupled to this zoning policy is the recommendation that governments should ‘evaluate the carrying and population supporting capacity of major agricultural areas’, and, where such areas are deemed to be ‘overpopulated’, take steps to change the ‘man/land ratio’ (their terminology) by ‘facilitating the accommodation of migrating populations into better endowed areas’. Transmigration programmes are explicitly recommended as a possible way forward.

Peasants who have been forced onto marginal lands as a result of ‘high potential areas’ being taken over for intensive export-oriented agriculture will thus be liable to resettlement at the whim of any government that deems them a threat to the environment. Since it is admitted that there are few ‘better endowed areas’ that can be opened for agriculture, the majority of the new transmigrants will have no option but to move to the slums of large cities or to clear land in forests. Many of the displaced are likely to wind up as labourers or tied producers growing cash crops under contract to large corporations. Predictably, perhaps, the proponents of such ‘sustainable agriculture’ policies do not consider the possibility that ecological stress in marginal areas would be better relieved by reclaiming ‘high potential areas’ for peasant agriculture.

The global managers thus threaten to unleash a new wave of colonialism, in which the management of people - even whole societies - for the benefit of commercial interests is now justified in the name of environmental protection. Whereas in the past ‘crown sovereignty’ and ‘poverty alleviation’ were used to legitimize the appropriation of local resources and the dismantling of local institutions for the national good, under the new regime, integral local practices are to be broken down yet further in the service of systemic goals. This time these goals are not simply to provide raw materials, cheap labour, and markets to an international economic system, but also to supply environmental repair or caretaker services to mitigate the problems that system itself has created. Carbon-dioxide-absorbing tree farms will supplant peasants’ fields and fallsows. Tropical forests will be taken away from their inhabitants to provide services to Northern industry, researchers and tourists, and population control efforts will be redoubled as a way of taking pressure off Northern-controlled resources.

The new and additional financial resources agreed at Rio are likely further to reinforce that management strategy. The loans agreed during the pilot phase of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), which aims to ‘help’ developing countries to ‘contribute towards solving global environmental problems’, give an indication of how green funds will be used to further elite interests. At the time, GEF’s terms of reference restricted it to funding environmental projects which are of ‘global’ - rather than local - significance and which would therefore be ‘of benefit to the world at large’. Its four priorities being the ‘protection of biodiversity’, the mitigation of global warming, the control of pollution in international waters, and the management of stratospheric ozone depletion. Few would deny that these are all areas of major concern; it is also incontestable that the chief perpetrators of the destruction in all four areas are Northern interests, acting in conjunction with southern elites. But GEF has not singled out these areas in order to take on the world’s dominant elite; rather, it is...
concerned with securing control of those aspects of the environment - the atmosphere, the seas and biodiversity - that are necessary to the continued throughput of resources in the global economy. Thus, by designating the atmosphere and biodiversity as ‘global commons’, the GEF was able to override the local claims of those who rely on local commons and effectively assert that everyone has a right of access to them, that local people have no more claim to them than a corporation based on the other side of the globe. Pressing problems with a direct impact on local peoples - desertification, toxic waste pollution, landlessness, pesticide pollution and the like. all of which could be judged as being of ‘global concern’ - are thus pushed to one side while the local environment is sized up for its potential benefit to the North and its allies in the South. It is surely no coincidence, for example, that 59 per cent of projects approved under the first tranche of the GEF should have been for ‘biodiversity protection’. Nor is it surprising that the chair of the GEF, Mohamed El-Ashry, singled out areas which ‘include important gene pools or encompass economically significant species’ as the priority for funding. Biodiversity protection is thus translated into protecting biodiversity not for its own sake but for the global economy.

Likewise, the GEF uses the notion of ‘internalizing’ ecological costs as a formula not for preventing inherently destructive projects but for providing additional resources to them in the guise of green funding. Thus, El-Ashry told World Bank News: ‘We now know that the environmental costs of building dams can be considerable. The belief in the past was that environmental considerations were additional costs that could be postponed until a country became fully developed. But we’ve learned that these costs should be considered investments. Postponing these investments can only result in higher costs later on.’ The message to dam builders was clear: not only does the GEF believe it possible to mitigate the damage done by dams, but it is willing to pay for such mitigatory measures. Such cynicism in the face of the overwhelming evidence of the destructiveness of large dams is unforgivable. For, in reality, no amount of animal rescue schemes, education programmes, biosphere reserves or direct monetary compensation can undo the ecological damage done by dams, or make good the psychological and social rape inflicted by such projects on local people. Internalizing these externalities by reducing them to figures on a balance sheet that can then be magicked away by setting them against supposed benefits may be politically expedient but it does not make the projects any more defensible morally, ecologically or socially. For what the GEF refers to as ‘externalities’ are flesh and blood: they are real people, real animals. They are not simply ‘germplasm’ or ‘biodiversity’. They bleed when bulldozers crush them. They cry when they are uprooted from their homes. They are ‘externalities’ only in the sense that they are ‘external’ to the interests of those who determine the GEF’s priorities. They are in the way.

Nothing could be more revealing of the agenda that UNCED set itself to promote.

Notes